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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (TEXT PARA 12)

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DELIVERS DEMOCRACY MESSAGE IN
NAKHCHIVAN, AZERBAIJAN'S EXCLAVE

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR ANNE E. DERSE PER 1.4(B,D).

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: During a November 7 visit to the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan, the Ambassador delivered a strong message on the importance of democratic development to Azerbaijan's future. She met with Nakhchivan Prime Minister Alovat Bakhshiyyev, and visited several Nakhchivani historical monuments and two universities. The Ambassador delivered a speech on democracy, engaged in a question and answer session with students, and gave a press interview. She also met with Nakhchivan's political party branches and representatives from the exclave's primary NGOs. Throughout the day students, journalists, historians, and politicians raised concerns with a recent photo exhibition at Harvard University reported to portray many Nakhchivani monuments as Armenian. Concerns raised with the Ambassador throughout the day also reiterated the need for greater U.S. engagement in Nakhchivan. END SUMMARY

MEETING WITH THE PRIME MINISTER

¶2. (SBU) In the absence of Nakhchivan Parliament Chair Vasif Talibov, who had been called unexpectedly to Baku to participate in an event in honor of Turkish President Gul's visit, the Ambassador met with Nakhchivan Prime Minister Alovat Bakhshiyyev. In the meeting, the Ambassador outlined the priorities in the bilateral relationship: energy, security, and reform. She raised several human rights cases, urging Bakhshiyyev to ensure the Nakhchivani authorities thoroughly investigate the alleged abuses and prosecute those responsible. Emphasizing that the U.S. supports a strong, sovereign Azerbaijan, the Ambassador explained that in the U.S. view, to be strong, the state must have a strong mandate and strong support from the population. She said that strong democratic institutions will help Azerbaijan mitigate regional pressure, but also help deepen relations with the U.S. The Ambassador thanked Bakhshiyyev for Azerbaijan's contribution of troops in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kosovo, and noted that in turn, the U.S. is committed to helping Azerbaijan with its security situation by finding a peaceful, reasoned solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and with its pursuit of NATO accession.

¶3. (C) Bakhshiyyev noted that Azerbaijanis, particularly Nakhchivanis, view Azerbaijan's relationship with the U.S. as important. He said that Azerbaijanis are especially interested in developing more people-to-people relationships with Americans, through programs like student exchanges. The relationship with the U.S. is beneficial to Azerbaijan, Bakhshiyyev continued, adding "We can't learn anything from Russia and Iran; they would set us back." Bakhshiyyev said

that sometimes Azerbaijanis become angry with the U.S. because it applies a "double-standard" to Azerbaijan; "Even though we're Muslim, we're civilized" he said. The Ambassador responded that the U.S. deeply values its relationship with the Muslim world, adding that Azerbaijan's role as a secular, democratic Muslim country is particularly important. Regarding the Ambassador's concern on the human rights cases, Bakhshiyev said "We are all human; we make mistakes. But we're taking steps to address these violations."

¶ 14. (C) Referring to the U.S. role in the OSCE Minsk Group process, Bakhshiyev said that Azerbaijan does not agree with reaching a "mutually acceptable" solution, because he said that would mean a solution that is acceptable to Russia, not just Armenia. He said that the U.S. has done nothing while Russia oppresses Georgia and sends its troops to the Armenian-occupied portions of Azerbaijan. According to Bakhshiyev, Azerbaijanis will "get along" with Armenians once Russia is out of the picture. The stated U.S. position on the conflict was too late, he continued, because the territories were already occupied. "What are you so afraid of," he asked, "are Russia and Armenia so important?"

¶ 15. (C) Noting that the U.S. believes there are reasonable people in Iran, the Ambassador said that the U.S. remains committed to finding a diplomatic solution to Iran's nuclear programs. Bakhshiyev said bluntly that change in Iran's nuclear policy would be impossible without a regime change. Diplomatic channels, he said, would only work with a democratic country. The Ambassador explained that the U.S. has offered Iran a very attractive incentive package to stop developing uranium, and noted that should it do so, Iran would be free to develop a peaceful nuclear program. She also referred to economic sanctions imposed against Iran, which Bakhshiyev said would do no good.

MEETING WITH POLITICAL PARTY BRANCH LEADERS

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¶ 16. (SBU) The Ambassador met with regional branch leaders of the political parties active in Azerbaijan. Participants included Mohammad Rzayev of the Popular Front Party; Meydan Babayev of Musavat Party; Faig Aliyev of the Hope Party; Vafa Rahimov of the Citizens' Development Party; and Nuraddin Bayramov of the Open Society Party. The Ambassador discussed the five areas of democratic institution-building: anti-corruption and rule of law; respect for human rights; strong political processes, including elections, parliament, and political parties; a free and independent media; and an engaged, empowered, educated citizenry. Asking about their party activities, the Ambassador solicited the group's thoughts on Nakhchivan's political situation. She noted that Nakhchivan can be a difficult operating environment, and asked the group for suggestions on how the U.S. could be better engaged in Nakhchivan.

¶ 17. (C) Meydan Babayev said that the visit of EUR A/S Fried to Azerbaijan and recent Embassy statements are no different than those in previous pre-elections periods, which he believes were ineffective. To affect real change, he said that the U.S. must translate these statements into actions, which he viewed as direct support to the opposition. According to Babayev, the U.S. has never supported the Azerbaijani opposition, so, he asked, who would want democracy? He said that Iran is taking advantage of the situation, and that most Nakhchivanis have become opposed to democracy. Nuraddin Bayramov said that being an oppositionist in Nakhchivan takes the same amount of courage as being a "national hero." He proposed the establishment of a U.S. "representative office" in Nakhchivan where people can seek help and revoke their Azerbaijani citizenship. Bayramov noted concern that opposition members are not part of any public body in Nakhchivan.

¶ 8. (C) Vafa Rahimov raised his concern with the current economic situation in Nakhchivan, noting that the closure of one of Nakhchivan's primary commercial centers and violation of taxi drivers' rights, which affected 8,000 people, had recently brought 2,000 people to the streets. He said that Nakhchivanis are "tired of the dictatorship," which is causing people to flee to neighboring Turkey and Iran. Muhammad Rzayev said that cooperation between the U.S. and Azerbaijan has not been as strong as he would like, but that he is still hopeful. He noted that the Popular Front Party is considering boycotting the 2008 presidential election because of underlying problems, such as the media environment. Faig Aliyev said that the Nakhchivani authorities are using new tactics to crack down on dissent, such as oppositionist Alasgar Ismayilov's forced commitment to a mental institution. According to Aliyev, only the international community can help normalize the situation. He also said that the U.S. position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is weak, noting that the U.S. has the money and power to resolve the conflict if it wishes.

MEETING WITH NGO REPRESENTATIVES

¶ 9. (C) The Ambassador met with representatives of Nakhchivan's main NGOs. Participants included NGO Development Center Head Malahat Nasibov; Young National Democrats Head Ilgar Nasibov; and Healthy Future Head Muhammad Rzayev. The Ambassador noted concern over several recent human rights cases in Nakhchivan, and solicited the group's thoughts on potential further U.S. engagement in the exclave. Nasibova thanked the Ambassador for making the trip, and noted that meeting the Ambassador would offer her some protection for at least several months. She said that Nakhchivan is currently facing problems with democratization that Baku faced eight years ago. Nasibova described a climate of intense pressure from the authorities, but also outside pressure from Iran, and noted increased Iranian influence in the exclave.

¶ 10. (C) Nasibova raised deep concern with a population flow from Nakhchivan, and said that within a year of the opening of the Turkish consulate, 59,000 Nakhchivanis -- out of a reported population of 420,000 -- received tourist visas. Nasibov believes that most of these individuals have not returned, and noted that a substantial Nakhchivani community now exists in Turkey. Nasibov briefed the Ambassador on his work, noting his focus on encouraging youth to become active in civil society. Rzayev explained that he works on raising awareness on HIV/AIDS, which he said is becoming a growing problem in Nakhchivan, because the exclave is used as a transit point for migrant workers and others. He noted a need for more USAID programs in Nakhchivan, particularly in civil society development.

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CONCERN OVER HARVARD PHOTO EXHIBITION

¶ 11. (SBU) In addition to her meetings, the Ambassador toured several important Nakhchivani monuments, where local historians explained their historical significance. She visited Nakhchivan State University, where she stopped by the American Bar Association's new Legal Clinic (funded by USAID), and the Cisco Network Training Academy. The Ambassador delivered a speech on democracy at Nakhchivan's private Uzel University, and engaged in a question and answer session with students. She participated in the official opening ceremony of a PD-funded Regional Library Information Center, where she gave remarks alongside the Nakhchivan Minister of Culture and Tourism. At each stop, well-rehearsed questions were posed -- often in English -- regarding a photo exhibit at Harvard University that Azerbaijanis believe portrays thousands of Nakhchivani

monuments as Armenian. The Ambassador also fielded questions on the U.S. position regarding the PKK in Iraq; the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the four pertinent UN Security Council resolutions; the attempted U.S. Congress draft resolution characterizing the 1915 events in Turkey as "genocide;" Iran's nuclear program; segregation in the U.S; and the U.S. position on proposed changes to Azerbaijan's electoral code.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) Nakhchivan, which shares a 179 kilometer border with Iran, is cut off from the rest of Azerbaijan by the Republic of Armenia and a strip of Azerbaijani territory occupied by Armenian separatists, resulting in a heightened perception by local authorities that this perennial state of crisis requires a firm hand. It has also served as a power base for the governing elite, as former President Heydar Aliyev and many of his close advisors had ethnic and historic roots in the exclave. Democratic freedom in Nakhchivan lags far behind that in Baku, making it difficult even for NGOs engaged in social and health issues to carry out their activities, let alone the opposition. Concerns raised with the Ambassador during her trip underscored Nakhchivanis interest in and the need for more regular engagement in Nakhchivan, from the U.S. and the broader international community. DERSE